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A FEDERAL ROLE IN AVIATION SECURITY

HON. NICK J. RAHALL II

OF WEST VIRGINIA

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Tuesday, October 30, 2001

Mr. RAHALL. Mr. Speaker, the Federal Government must take over our Nation's aviation security system. I am proud to be an original cosponsor of H.R. 3110, the "Transportation Security Enhancement Act of 2001" which will make security screeners Federal employees.

I believe security screening must become a Federal function because, until now, the airlines have contracted out to private security companies for the lowest bidder. As a result of this arrangement, the men and women who screen passengers as they walk through metal detectors at our Nation's airports are paid low wages—just above the minimum wage—have no benefits, and have a turnover rate as high as 400 percent. They leave their jobs before

they have a chance to master them. This means that people who screen passengers as they walk through the metal detectors have very little experience looking for potentially lethal weapons before passengers take their carry-on luggage aboard a plane.

I attach for the RECORD an op-ed entitled "Airport security shouldn't be hit-or-miss" by James E. Casto, Associate Editor of the Herald Dispatch of Huntington, WV. Mr. Casto writes a rather entertaining piece about being stopped at the airport in San Diego, CA, in June 1998, when a security screener spotted "something" in his bag. The "something" turned out to be a letter opener in his toiletry kit. He used it as a makeshift screwdriver to replace a screw he lost from his eyeglasses.

But woven into that entertaining piece, Mr. Casto noted that:

As September 11th made tragically clear, until now airline and airport security has been pretty much a hit-or-miss proposition.

While the screener at the San Diego airport was really on her toes, others are not. Mr. Casto noted that during a long layover in Chicago, there was a

gaggle of screeners who were laughing and apparently having a great time. I doubt they would have noticed if I'd had an A-K 47 under my arm.

Mr. Casto's message is clear, concise, complete and correct. The aviation security workforce must have consistent work standards, because they answer to a vast number of companies with inconsistent work standards. I believe federalizing the force is the surest way to achieve this goal.

When the Federal Government takes over training, supervision, and employment of security screeners, as the "Transportation Security Enhancement Act of 2001" provides, they will be subject to the highest performance standards. In addition, they will be paid decent wages and benefits, which will encourage them to stay on the job and master their jobs.

Our Nation's passengers will then be reassured that the most thorough screening of all passengers has taken place before they board their flights. This system is the best step we can take to prevent the heinous crime of September 11, 2001, from ever happening again.

AIRPORT SECURITY SHOULDN'T BE HIT-OR-MISS

I remember the incident in every detail—although I had to check back a bit to find exactly when it happened. It was June of 1998, and I was at the airport in San Diego, Calif., heading home.

I got in line at security. When my turn came, I placed my bag on the conveyor, stepped through the metal detector and reached to retrieve my bag, only to find that one of the security screeners had a firm grasp on it.

"There's something in here," she said, fixing me with the same kind of cold-eyed stare she no doubt would have given bank robber John Dillinger had he turned up in her line.

I resisted an impulse to tell her that the only contraband in my bag was some dirty socks.

"May I take a look?" she asked, delving into my bag before I had a chance to even answer.

"I don't see it," she said, as she pawed through my stuff.

"See What?" I asked.

"The machine showed a letter opener in here."

A letter opener? What the dickens would I be doing with a letter opener? Slowly, a faint memory dawned.

Unzipping my toilet kit, she reached in, fumbled around a bit and triumphantly pulled out a metal letter opener.

She summoned her supervisor, who looked even less amused than she did.

"Listen," I said, "if this is a problem, I'll simply leave the opener here. I don't need it. All I want to do is catch my plane."

I started to walk away.

"Wait," the supervisor said, "you have to fill out a form."

So I had to complete and sign an "Abandoned Property" form, giving my name and flight number, before I hurried on my way.

How in the world had a letter opener found its way into my toilet kit? Actually, the explanation was simple: One day, I lost a screw out of my eyeglasses. I used the letter opener as a makeshift screwdriver to replace it. And, since I was on my way to the airport at the time, I threw the screwdriver in my toilet kit in case I needed it again.

But that was years before my 1998 California visit.

At the time, I estimated that I had gone through maybe 50 or so airport security checks with the letter opener tucked away in my kit. Nobody said a word about it—until I encountered that eagle-eyed female screener at the San Diego airport.

Since Sept. 11 and the terrorist attacks perpetrated by airline hijackers said to be armed with simple box cutters, I've thought a lot about my old letter opener. And about the amazing number of times I was able to breeze through airport security checkpoints without anyone saying a word about it.

As Sept. 11 made tragically clear, until now airline and airport security has been pretty much a hit-or-miss proposition.

Security checkpoints have been manned by people generally working for whatever company submitted the low bid for the contract. Often, they've been paid minimum wage and given little or no training.

Far more typical than my experience in San Diego was one I encountered when, during a long layover in Chicago, I waltzed through security several times—letter opener and all—and never got a second glance from a gaggle of screeners who were laughing and talking and apparently having a great time. I doubt they would have noticed, if I'd had an AK-47 under my arm.

Congress is debating changes in airline and airport security. The Senate has voted to have security operations taken over by the federal government. The House and President Bush favor a system that would see the federal government supervise and train private-sector employees.

As for me, I think I'd favor tracking down that tough-as-nails screener I encountered out in San Diego and putting her in charge.

CONGRATULATING COURT APPOINTED SPECIAL ADVOCATES (CASA) OF FRESNO COUNTY

HON. GEORGE RADANOVICH

OF CALIFORNIA

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Tuesday, October 30, 2001

Mr. RADANOVICH. Mr. Speaker, I rise today to honor the Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) of Fresno County for earning national recognition for their exemplary